

Floating Homes: Complex Construction for the Simple Life

by Kathleen O'Brien



When Architect Jim Jessup was a "starving University of Washington student" in 1964, he was able to buy a houseboat on Lake Union in Seattle for \$300. He paid \$12 monthly moorage, and city sewage hookup wasn't necessary. The houseboats he designs today, on the other hand, cost his clients a minimum of \$250,000, usually more; need utility hookups; and often require an additional monthly moorage fee of \$300 to \$400.

In Seattle, where Jessup is still based, most water sites have been developed. A typical houseboat project in that city thus consists of the new owner removing an old houseboat from the site, having the float rebuilt or replaced by a float specialist, and building a completely new home on the float. In some cases, a new float will include a "basement" — living space below deck.

"In most cases, it's not worth remodeling," Jessup says. "By the time you take out the dry rot from an old houseboat, you're better off starting from scratch." Buying an old houseboat isn't cheap, either. Water sites are so precious, you can spend \$140,000 for a home you know you're going to tear down. The size of the site seems to be irrelevant. "A 2,000-square-foot float essentially goes for the same price as a 600-square-foot float," says Jessup.

The two-story, 1,250-square-foot home pictured here cost Jessup's client, Bruce Deets, about \$300,000. He paid \$140,000 for the property and a new float, and the rest for design and hard construction costs.

George Bradshaw and son Ken, of Edmonds, Wash., were the contractors on the job. They've worked with Jessup often over the past 20 years, and have built many floating homes. The Bradshaws enjoy houseboat construction, but say it can be "fussy." Jessup likens the level of difficulty to that of building on a steep site. "Essentially, you're building a Uniform Building Code house, but it's on a float."

Floating home design, says Jessup, has to take into consideration several factors peculiar to the watery site: It typically provides little privacy, is small ("but the owner wants all the things he had on his last regular big home"), lends itself to a box shape ("but the owner doesn't want a box"), and moves. "You can try to make the home and float more rigid to reduce that, but regardless, it's going to roll." This leads to problems with potential leaks, especially



PHOTOS BY FRANK BRADSHAW

The "simple" life on the water is shared with many neighbors. Like most houseboat sites, the Deets site was not long on privacy.

Floated on large cedar logs, the pressure-treated deck of the Deets house takes shape. The more common and less costly option is to float the house on a series of 52-gallon plastic barrels.

Due to difficult access and no level lines, framing takes four times what it does on dry land. Here, contractor Ken Bradshaw inspects the deck off the second-story master bedroom, five weeks after completing the float.

With a hot tub on the deck facing the water, the compact 1,250-square-foot home includes a storage workshop, kitchen, living/dining room, two full baths, and two bedrooms, each with a small deck. The six-month project went up "very fast," according to designer Jessup.

around skylights. The constant movement also makes flexible utility lines necessary.

In addition, the houseboat must meet strict height restrictions. This, coupled with the typical client's desire for as much space as they had in their previous home, leads to tricky beam connections and other complicated details. "Sometimes we're working to 1/2-inch tolerance to get the most out of the height we're allowed," says the elder Bradshaw. "The city has come out to measure every job I've worked on." Bradshaw has heard of cases where work had to be torn down because it exceeded the limit, so he's pretty careful.

The high level of detail makes for labor-intensive construction. Framing typically takes four weeks, which Jessup says is four times what it generally takes to frame a home he's designed for land. It isn't just construction details that add to the time and expense, though. Special precautions must be taken to adhere to water protection regulations. Materials have to be packed in; waste has to be packed out. Deliveries must be small, because there is often no place to store materials on site.

When there is storage space, the materials need to be balanced. Bradshaw and Jessup recall a situation where an owner/builder lost his home because a delivery of drywall and an unusual snowfall combined to tip the whole thing over. They say they have to be careful when holding an open house not to allow too many people in the houseboat at one time.

Once construction is under way on a houseboat, the float underneath begins to sink unevenly. Divers are hired to install more flotation as the project continues. "What this means," says Bradshaw, "is that you have to throw away the level, and just build square." Jessup adds that the house won't be totally leveled until the last piece of furniture is in it. "You move in a piano to one corner, and the house develops an attitude," he says.

Bradshaw cautions would-be houseboat builders "not to stand back and admire their work." He's had to rescue a few carpenters who have fallen into the drink, complete with loaded nail aprons. He also admits to losing at least one favorite tool per job to "the goddess of the lake." But he's smiling when he says it. ■

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